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REVIEW

Paul Elliot, *Guattari Reframed* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012), ISBN: 978-1-7806-233-3

Guattari Reframed by Paul Elliot attempts—as do all the books in the "reframed" series—to link a thinker to aesthetics and art criticism. Elliott's ostensible project is to make a case for how we might use Guattari's work to address contemporary themes in aesthetics. On that score, one can find much to praise Elliot for. However, I wish here to draw attention to what I take to be a core issue for the Guattarian corpus: May 1968. The event of May '68 is not, to be sure, the central theme of Elliot's book. But I think it will be instructive to draw out the implicit thread that links May '68 to Elliot's conception of Guattari's contribution to aesthetics. Hence my aim will be to connect and critique this with reference to the work of sculptor Jean Tinguley, whose work Elliot rightly points to as a fitting illustration of Guattari's thinking on art and aesthetics in action.

May '68 is a problem for Guattari's (and Deleuze's) legacy. That may sound offensive to the ears of many who (like myself) believe that something truly wonderful happened in those weeks of May in Paris some forty years ago. The fact remains though that the Left has on the whole been unwilling to admit that whatever else one might say about May '68—it failed. The truth is that the revolutionary energy—a politics or *energetics* of desire—that linked students and factory workers—failed to hold for more than four weeks. Nonetheless, for many (Elliott included), the event provides an exemplary case study in Guattarian aesthetics and politics if not a Guattarian aesthetics of politics. The event of May '68 is a virtual case study in the coming together of what Guattari would call the "molar" and "molecular". As Elliott notes, May '68 for Guattari may be described thus:

> The desires of almost an entire population spontaneously collided and formed an unstoppable force that brought the government to its knees; factory workers, students, filmmakers, philosophers, dustmen, intellectuals and so on, were all fuelled by their prospective micropolitical concerns but came to form a molar subject group. (49)

Elliott further notes that the energetic politics of May were about

> challenging and dismantling [socio-political] micro-structures, the structures that we all rely on: the seemingly meaningless and petty restrictions that we all engage with everyday. To liberate the world of fascism, you must first liberate yourself. Forget the macropolitical—the micropolitical is where it's at. (50).

The focus on the micropolitical was to an extent responsible for the collapse of May '68. What is more, the valorization of the act of liberating the self—today a hackneyed '60s cliché—also came back with a vengeance in the 1980s in the horrifying form of the "me generation" and the rise of the yuppies. The fact that this happened, does not mean that what happened in May of '68 was compromised entirely from the outset by an unacknowledged spirit of selfish indulgence, but it is to say that it was not entirely untainted by it either. That's the problem with building politics on desire: desire wants many things including things that come with price tags.

Today we must ask: is a politics of desire itself desirable? Of course the answer depends on what is being desired. But to pose that question is to actually dispense with the entire notion of a politics of desire. If desire, as Guattari and Deleuze conceive it, is a revolutionary force without object, then it follows that a politics of desire can have no object or practical *telos*. It only desires the expansion of the force of desire itself. Guattari's profound interventions into the study of psyche and society argue that desire is liberatory. But one must bear in mind ideas that are good for liberating the self, or for liberating the study of aesthetics, from the trappings of bourgeois values may not work—or work only briefly—in the area of political revolution.

Part of the problem with Guattari's political framework is that is it relentlessly affirmative in its desire for more desire. The affirmative bias can be heard in Elliott's reading of Jean Tinguley's sculptures.

> The art installations of Jean Tinguley are classic examples of the will of the machine to keep turning. His works look like machines, they function as machines but they produce no product except the kinetic joy of machinic movement. Tinguley's sculptures are composed of the detritus of the twentieth century—wheels, pistons, pulleys, chains, carousel horses, garden gnomes—but they are constructed as giant machines that whir and clank and revolve, celebrating the exuberance of movement. What flows through Tinguley's machines is desire itself, desire to keep moving, desire to connect, to disconnect, and to synthesise. The heterogeneity of Tinguley's partial objects, the bits that make his machines is unified only by the desire that flows through them. (55)

This is a fair description of Tinguley's work, but it leaves out other aspects. I for one am not convinced that Tinguley's works are simply about the desire to keep moving. All their clanging, whirring, squealing, and scraping speaks audibly to the problem of movement, and to the risk or contingency of the way in which things—machines or otherwise—hang together always in a more or less perilous way. Watching a Tinguley sculpture in motion is to watch with some apprehension that the whole thing may come crashing down at any moment: at any minute the affirmative will of the machine to keep moving will be overcome by the third law of thermodynamics. Tinguley is a thinker of entropy as much as assemblage and generation.

For a notable example of the entropic drive in Tinguley's work, consider his *Homage to New York* built to mark the opening of the then new sculpture garden at the Museum of Modern Art in 1966. Before a throng of black-tie benefactors and patrons, *Homage to New York* was switched on. It twittered, bucked, rattled, and finally burst into flames shedding bits and pieces this way and that. What could be the meaning of this? Did the work suggest that a cer-

tain New York had been lost or destroyed in the wake of the further institutionalisation of the New York art-world by moneyed elites? Perhaps, but more generally it seemed to say: "things fall apart."

I offer the above anecdote as an antidote to the affirmative bias of Guattarian thinking. Desire is fragile. For as much as desire can get machines of one kind or another going, desire can also lead to loss, breakdown, to a movement that sputters, shutters, or shatters. An art viewer—like a political participant—is more than a mere processing plant or "desiring machine" that redirects and intensifies the flow of desire between the artwork and the world. Politics as much as aesthetics can overwhelm as much as empower its subjects

To conclude: for Elliott as for Guattari, I would say questions remain. How can we think the lesson of breakdown? How can we expand the incredibly rich resources of Guattari's thought in order to touch the fundamentally precarious nature of the human condition? Elliott's book is well researched, well argued, and lucid — in short it is a welcome and long awaited breath of fresh air into the world of Guattari commentary. However, it should cast our eyes beyond the political ecstasy of '68. For me it offered a chance to do something that Guattari would no doubt approve of and call for: to think the un-thought in his thought.

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